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FISHERIES AGENCY PLANS KILLER WHALE CONSERVATION STRATEGY

NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) said today it is taking the next step in the process, begun last July, to designate the Puget Sound's Southern Resident stock of killer whales as depleted under the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). The agency said it is using this process to engage the public in developing a conservation strategy to restore the population to healthy numbers. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is an agency of the Commerce Department.

During the [proposed rule](#) 60-day [comment period](#), NOAA Fisheries will be seeking comment from the public on the proposed designation. In addition, the agency will be seeking advice on potential conservation measures. The public is free to include suggestions for conservation measures with their comments on the proposed designation. NOAA Fisheries will also hold a public meeting regarding killer whale conservation measures in the near future. NOAA Fisheries intends to develop the conservation plan in an open and collaborative manner with input from interested parties.

"The public has already played an active role in the protection of these whales," said Bob Lohn, northwest regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries. "We look forward to their continued involvement as we develop a conservation strategy for these special animals."

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A depleted designation under the MMPA provides additional protection for a marine mammal population by authorizing conservation or management measures to correct factors that may be causing the population's decline. The conservation measures are in addition to the prohibitions already in effect against harming or killing any marine mammal. The law calls for the creation of a conservation plan "as soon as possible" after the formal designation of a depleted stock.

Conservation plans, under the MMPA, are modeled after recovery plans required by the Endangered Species Act, and are developed to guide efforts to restore a population to optimum levels. The plans identify areas where more research is needed to address contributing factors for decline and document the measures needed to recover the population.

A popular icon in the Pacific Northwest, the population of Southern Resident killer whales has fallen from a high of about 97 animals in 1996 to 80 last year. In spite of some encouraging new births, concern for the population remains high and support is strong for actions to restore the population to healthy numbers.

Comments on the proposed rule or on conservation measures can be sent to Chief, Protected Resources Division, NOAA Fisheries, 525 NE Oregon Street, Suite 500, Portland, OR, 97232. Comments can also be sent electronically through the Agency's "e-Comments" Web site.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation's living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation's coastal and marine resources.

For more information online:

NOAA - <http://www.noaa.gov>

NOAA Fisheries - <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov>

Killer Whale conservation and e-Comments - <http://www.nwr.noaa.gov>

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